

INFLUENCE OF POLITICS IN THE COMMISSIONING AND DESIGN OF PROJECTS: A CASE STUDY OF ROYAL CLOCK TOWER (ABRAJ AL-BAIT), MECCA, SAUDI ARABIA

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the history of architectural projects commissioning, particularly when the practice of architecture became influential, politics became the day's order in project/design commissioning. In this respect, the study seeks to understand how the third tallest building in the world and the most expensive building was commissioned. Are there any political inclination in the commissioning process, if yes, what are the issues involved. The study relies on the review of relevant literature to make inferences. One of the issues find out by the study is that political influence can be objectively employed or abused; two examples were drawn to this respect; a case of the Seagram building and how a client's daughter uses her influence to convince her father to commission an architect Mies van der Rohe. The other is a highly influential client, an eccentric millionaire whose stringent conditions forced Le Corbusier to abandon the commission he signed. The study finds out that The Royal Clock Tower building project's influence is between the developer of the project and the Saudi government. The developer – Saudi Binladin Group (SBG), has long ties with the Saudi government. As such, since its inception in the 1930s, it had been handling large Saudi governmental projects. As for the architects that were responsible for the design and supervision of the project, this study finds out that each of the two parties distinguished themselves in their areas of specializations and with years of practice and experience they acquired, for them, little or no political influence was seem to be used during the selection process. Finally, it was observed that strong political force in project delivery tends to relegate other competitors, moreover, there is tendency in the company falling into corrupt practice for over enjoying political influence unless check and balance measures were put in place.

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Political influence, Commissioning, building projects

Article History:

Received: 11 Aug 2020

Revised: 30 Sep 2020

Accepted: 25 Nov 2020

Available Online: 22 Dec 2020

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1. POLITICS, INFLUENCE AND ARCHITECTURAL COMMISSIONING

According to Christoph, David, Gus, Job, and Madeleine, (2010), architecture is realized through a combination of different parties: architects and clients, among others. Commissioning of projects largely depends on how building design, development, and contracts are awarded. While Politics seem to be among the key factors in both national/international development, likewise, the buildings are considered to be among the major windows through which such developments can be measured. After World War II, many European politicians greatly influenced how most of the war-affected cities were to be reconstructed and who would be 'commissioned' to take up the challenges (Grafe, 2010). A different example in North America is that of pure influence where Phillis Lambert influences her father in commissioning architect Mies van der Rohe's design of the Seagram building. In her own case, the influence later earns her a name and reputation in modern architecture history (Mahaffy and Salingaros, 2013; Pimlott, 2010). An example where influence can create chaos is that between a highly influential and an eccentric client – Charles de Beistegni and architect Le Corbusier, he influenced the Commissioning, but later created stringent conditions that at the end forced the architect to drop the project (Grafe, 2010; Bergh, 2010).

Considering the numerous architects that distinguish themselves all over the world, and a smaller number of jobs, particularly lucrative ones, it is imperative to note that politics has a great influence on projects commissioning. Sometimes politics can pose a negative challenge on the part of architects, buildings, and or overall cost implication of design and construction.

This study aimed at seeking an understanding of the role of politics in the design and Commissioning of the Mecca Royal Clock tower building. Through studying of past occurrences of the area in question such that the study can be placed within the context and finally draw inferences.

2. METHODOLOGY

The methodology employed for the study was a review of relevant literature in search of secondary data for the contextualization of the study. In contrast, the primary data were source through a case study approach and finally discussed findings from the survey.

3. CONTRACT AWARD AND POLITICAL INCLINATION

Like most of the buildings in this class, politics played an important role in the development, award, and commissioning, and the clock tower project was not different; it was 'assigned' for development to one of the kingdom's most powerful and influential contractor, multinational construction giant, a conglomerate which was estimated to consist of 537 companies (Paul, Arnold, Ashad, & Kalin, 2018), handling multinational businesses all over the world. It is highly influential not only in Saudi Arabia but also throughout the Middle East, Europe, the US, and Africa – The Saudi Binladin Group (SBG), is a company owned by an entrepreneur, and friend to the founder of Saudi Arabia, King Abdel Aziz al Saud, and this relationship led to the award of very important governmental projects throughout Saudi Arabia from the inception of the company since the 1930s, ranging from Grand mosques upgrading and maintenance, road networks, rail lines and so on.

One of the most significant projects currently under construction is the contractual agreement signed in 2011 with the Saudi government to construct the world's tallest building (Jeddah Tower) in Jeddah, and it came just a year before the completion of the royal clock tower building. It is no doubt that SBG is highly influential politically as they handled large, lucrative governmental projects all over Saudi Arabia. Another move that can be seen as a tactic to further strengthen the company's political significance and influence with the Saudi government, SGB transferred its 36.2% stake to a company owned by the Saudi government in 2018. The government has a direct influence on the activities of SBG. Despite all these, back in 2015, the company had suffered what can be called a setback, when one of its cranes falls into the grand mosque complex due to high wind, resulting in the death of 118 people and 400 injuries; this lead to the banning of SBG construction activities in the kingdom, followed by setting up of a committee to evaluate SBG's level of adherence to standards, however, the suspension was lifted in May 2016, four years after completion of Royal clock tower building. The magnanimity of the Royal Clock Tower project cannot be overemphasized; the cost of the project is \$15 billion, making it the world's most expensive structure. In this note, assigning such big responsibility may indicate a strong influence on the part of the developer in securing the trust of the Saudi government to entrust such a world-class project. SBG was not only the contractor of the project but was also charged with the responsibility of a Developer of the entire project (from conception to project delivery). This absolute control is another indication of the strong political influence of SBG on Saudi government projects.

4. THE ROYAL CLOCK TOWER PROJECT

Standing 601 meters, it is a magnificent structure, an architectural masterpiece. It is the Royal Clock Tower or *Abraj al-Bait* in Arabic. A mixed-use system was comprising of hotels, shopping malls, and residential facilities (Figure 1). It is the 3rd tallest building globally, the tallest building in the Middle East, and Saudi Arabia's tallest building (Center for Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat, 2019). It has the largest clock globally with 43 meters in diameter (The Mecca Clock Tower, 2019). the building can be sighted from more than 30 kilometers away (Wainwright, 2012).



Fig. 1. Royal Clock Tower building from roof top of Masjid al-Haram Mecca, note the surrounding buildings with connecting corridors.

Source: (Researcher's field work, 2016)

The tower is surrounded by six smaller high rise buildings with a height range between 220m to 279m (Figure 2) constructed adjacent to the famous grand mosque al-Kaaba in Mecca. The central tower consists of 120 floors, an observatory, and an elegant clock at the central facility (Center for Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat, 2019). The construction began in 2002 and completed in 2012 (The New Saudi Arabia, 2019) as part of the King Abdulaziz endowment project, which was an effort to modernize the city and provide accommodation facilities for ever-growing pilgrims.

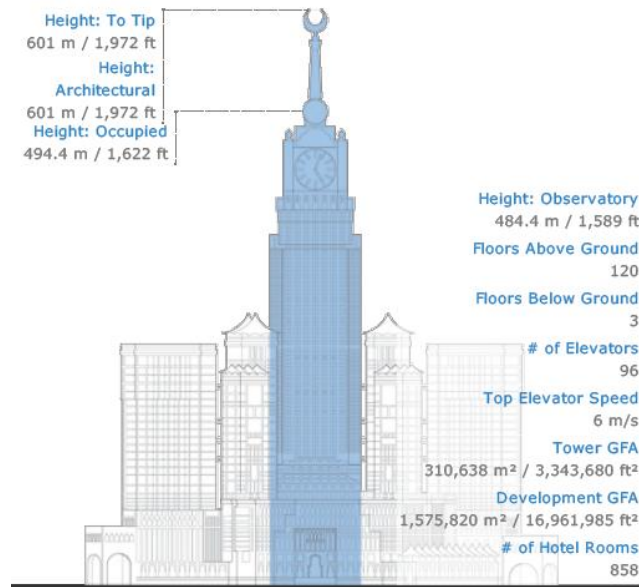


Fig. 2. An elevational description of Makkah Royal Clock Tower.
(Source: Skyscraper Center.com, 2019)

The construction site of the Royal Clock Tower was a base for a century-old structure constructed in the 18th century, a citadel (*Ajyad fortress*) built during the Othman empire when Mecca was under its rule. Pulling down the old design had drawn a series of concerns worldwide. Yet, the Saudi government went ahead with the development of the intended project claiming that the construction of the Royal Clock Tower building is in the interest of all visitors to the grand holy mosque, not for politics.

5. ARCHITECTS OF THE ROYAL CLOCK TOWER BUILDING



Fig. 3. Convertible umbrellas at Masjid al Nabawi, Medina, Saudi Arabia, seen at foreground Designed and constructed by SL Rasch GmbH
Source: (Researcher's field work, 2016)

The Royal Clock Tower building was commissioned in 2002 by SBG to Dar al Handasah, or *home of engineering* (Shair and Partners), a famous international project design and supervision organization. It is a multi-disciplinary consulting organization for architecture and engineering with over 40 offices in the Middle East, Asia, Africa, and Europe. It has five design centers

in Beirut, Cairo, London, Pune, and Amman. The company was in charge of designing the first phase of the structure, i.e., from the basement floor up to 450m.

The second phase of the tower, i.e., from 450m to 601m, was designed by German architect Mahmoud Bodo Rasch and his firm SL Rasch GmbH. This architectural firm specializes in designing buildings and lightweight structures (Design philosophy). Mahmoud Bodo Rasch follows his father and uncle, who were famous Avant-garde international styles during the 1920s. For Mr. Bodo, architecture is a family thing. In 1967 during his studies, he worked with renowned architect Frei Otto. He participated in the construction of many lightweight and tensile structures in Germany, including the German pavilion at Expo 67 in Montreal, Canada, in conjunction with Frei Otto. Among his notable projects in the Saudi kingdom are the convertible umbrellas in Masjid Al Nabwi in Medina (Figure 3). He is well known for designing and constructing lightweight structures throughout the world, leading him to receive numerous awards. The first project handled in Saudi Arabia was designing and constructing pilgrim's fireproof tents in Mina in 1999 (Figure 4). And in 2007, he designed tent structures and a lighting system, royal terminal Jeddah. Architect Mahmoud Bodo designed more than 21 highly influential lightweight structures in Saudi Arabia, including Pilgrims' terminal, King Abdul Aziz airport Jeddah, convertible umbrellas (29x29m) royal terminal Jeddah, sliding domes in Masjid al-Nabwi in Medina, among others.



Fig. 4. Fireproof tents at Mina camp designed by architect Mahmoud Bodo
Source: (Researcher's Field work, 2016)

To this note, SL Rasch had made a name globally in designing and constructing unusual structures that earn the company a reputation and influence of being invited to participate in many projects that stand out like automation, pneumatic, and all forms of lightweight structures. This is enough an influence for a company like SL Rasch to be recognized politically in and outside the Saudi kingdom.

6. THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE ROYAL CLOCK TOWER BUILDING

The initial proposal announcement of the height of the royal clock tower building was 734m. Later announcement after completing the project, the total height was 601m, less than 133m of the initial plan.

7. FINDINGS

Political influence is playing a key role in the commission of building projects with higher emphasis when such projects are governmental, and likewise in non-government projects, particularly when large companies and or organizations were involved. The study finds out that:

1. Excessive influence can lead to project abuse, either on the part of the client (commissioner) or the architect (designer). In either case, it may result in having a negative impact on the project and consequently on the lives of end-users and or financial mismanagement.
2. There is a high tendency of being biased on the part of project commissioners through relegating other competitors.
3. When Political influence is used objectively, it can prosper notional development.
4. The SBG Company has strong ties with the government of Saudi Arabia for decades ago.
5. In 2018 36.2% stake of SBG was transferred to the Saudi government.
6. The tower building was directly assigned to SBG to develop and construct.
7. Uniqueness in design, capability, and standing out, is a significant factor in the selection of firms

8. The selection of Firms that championed the design of tower building was based on merit.
9. National development is not limited to the participation of 'in-house' firms alone.

8. DISCUSSIONS

Internationally, political influence is the key to developmental growth, although it is in positive or negative ways. The study has shown that the issue of strong political influence as it affects national development, and architects had been around for decades, many architects had experienced its impact either negatively or otherwise, a good example was that of architect Le Corbusier on the one hand and Mies van der Rohe, on the other hand, their cases were of contrary experiences, but all were said to be as a result of political or high influence on the part of commissioner. The relationship between SBG and the Saudi government cannot be overemphasized. The number of Saudi government projects handled by the company is an indication of political ties since its inception. But what makes the tower building project distinct is assigning the project development and construction entirely to SBG. It selects the architects, finalizes the take-up processes, and then constructs the project.

The 2015 crane crisis which befalls SBG, raised a question of whether the company is taking advantage of its over influence to provide substandard materials and plants despite that fact that there was an occurrence which was attributed to force majeure, ascertaining the level of compliance to standards as means of checks and balances can have a great impact both in ensuring the quality of projects and also as a means of preventing corrupt practices. Looking at the profile of both firms that participated in the design of the project, it can be concluded that excelling and years of practice/experience are vital tools in securing and commissioning. Dar al Handasah had designed and supervised several architectural and engineering masterpieces throughout Middles east, so also is the SL Rasch, particularly in the areas of lightweight structures. It is therefore not surprising to see their signature on the tower building project

9. CONCLUSION

It is no doubt that commissioning large governmental and non-governmental projects goes hand in hand with political influence. However, some peculiarities do happen, particularly with firms that distinguish themselves, offering unique products and services. The Royal clock tower project is an international masterpiece that stands out. Without political inclination, it is possible for other competitors to win the award and even provide better services than SBG. Several projects handled within the Saudi kingdom by SBG are an open indication of its influence politically, but SL Rasch's works are said to be pure due to creativeness and distinction, with little or no political intervention.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

The study has these as its recommendations:

1. The governments or organizations should create a feedback mechanism that makes transparency before, during, and after project delivery such that political influence issues can be within acceptable limits.
2. Excessive political influence tends to lead stakeholders into corruption. Therefore equal opportunities should be given to all competitors.
3. Overloading a company with many projects may lead to delay in project period delivery, and quality issues, excessive changes in the initial plan in order to favor the contractor, therefore government or regulatory agencies should consider the manpower available when the contractor has ongoing projects.
4. The government should employ indigenous construction companies to ensure that large capital expenditure is kept as much as possible within the nation because the building industry accounts for significant Gross Domestic Product (GDP)

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